

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

FUTURE ROLES FOR NUCLEAR ARMS:  
WEAPONS, SYMBOLS, OR ANACHRONISM?

LONGER ESSAY

CORE COURSE IV: THE GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT  
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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>1994</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1994 to 00-00-1994</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Future Roles for Nuclear Arms: Weapons, Symbols, or Anachronism?</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>37</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## Future Roles for Nuclear Arms: Weapons, Symbols, or Anachronism?

### Introduction

Until the United States used atomic bombs to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the possibility of creating such a super-weapon was known only to a small number of physicists and military officials. Reactions to the new super-weapon were split. Immediately after the War efforts were made to "turn back the clock" and eliminate nuclear weapons. At the same time, additional countries began working to develop their own. For the next two decades nuclear weapons remained a central element of war-fighting between the great powers. During the 1970s a gradual transition began, driven partly by the strategic deterrence doctrine of the day, and partly by trends in public opinion in the United States and abroad.

By 1980, if not earlier, nuclear weapons were generally perceived to be essential to international peace but essentially unusable in war. The fact that the United States and the Soviet Union each possessed sufficient weapons of sufficient invulnerability to guarantee a devastating second strike on the other was understood to be the guarantor of peace between the superpowers (albeit not necessarily between their surrogates). However, nuclear weapons were widely perceived to be unusable against smaller

powers, none of which was perceived to pose a truly strategic threat to either superpower. Nuclear weapons had become symbols of status as a global power, but their utility in war was (except for global war among the superpowers) questionable.

Today that strategic threat, and the balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, have disappeared, as has the Soviet Union itself. While Russia and several other successor states still possess substantial numbers of nuclear weapons, and do present a potential threat, they do not constitute the threat the USSR did. In surveying this new world order, some commentators see it fraught with new threats, some of which require that the United States maintain its nuclear arsenal, while others argue that the most effective approach to addressing those new dangers includes nuclear disarmament.

No less an authority than Paul Nitze has argued that in the long run nuclear weapons provide no useful military capability and represent a political liability.<sup>1</sup> He argues that conventional precision weapons used in the Gulf War demonstrated the capability to perform the war-fighting roles previously assigned to nuclear weapons, and to do so in a militarily more effective and politically more acceptable manner. Nitze also argues that nuclear weapons no longer provide an effective deterrent against threats like Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Threats to use nuclear weapons are not credible, even in response to a nuclear attack, and

the United States and its allies have the conventional capability to defeat such threats. Iraq's use of nuclear weapons would only have guaranteed the coalition's destroying his regime.

Other commentators argue that even in this new world order the United States must maintain nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> They cite the potential for Russia or Ukraine to turn belligerent and, possessing large numbers of strategic nuclear weapons, to again pose a serious and direct nuclear threat to the United States, a threat which can only be deterred by U.S. nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> These authors also focus on the threat posed by continued proliferation of nuclear weapons, and in some cases of chemical and biological weapons. They argue that the United States must maintain nuclear weapons to deter such threats, but many of these same authors worry that leaders in newly nuclear weapon states will not be as susceptible to deterrence as the USSR was. Finally some of these authors claim that possession of nuclear weapons serves to maintain superpower status for the United States, an essentially political argument for nuclear weapons.

Considering what military and political roles nuclear weapons may play in the coming decade or two requires an analysis of the anticipated future national security environment and asking several key questions. Do nuclear weapons confer advantages, either in political or military confrontations? When the fighting starts, can nuclear

weapons actually be employed, or are they strictly political weapons, a useful threat, but ultimately an empty threat? Finally, are nuclear weapons actually a political liability? To address these questions properly, it is important to understand the historical context, the experience of the last fifty years.

### **Historical Roles: Weapons or Symbols?**

Nuclear weapons first appeared as war-fighting weapons. During the Second World War the United States developed the atomic bomb as a vastly larger explosive, a weapon that could destroy a city with a single bomb instead of the hundreds of sorties necessary with ordinance then available. During the War, and for many years afterwards, most military strategists (and scientists) did not understand the full horror of radiation, and the degree to radiation and their incredible explosive power made nuclear weapons fundamentally different from other weapons. In military doctrine of the time, the atomic bomb was essentially just a larger and more powerful bomb than others in the arsenal, and equally usable. It was not a special instrument or a symbol of political power.

But as early as the autumn of 1945, some in the U.S. and other governments understood that the atomic bomb was fundamentally different from conventional weapons and created new problems for international security. This thinking, reflected in the Acheson-Lillienthal Report, and

reflected earlier in a November 1945 joint statement by the President and the prime ministers of Great Britain and Canada, held that there can be no monopoly on nuclear weapons and no effective defense against them, proliferation and nuclear war must be prevented and the peaceful benefits of nuclear energy pursued, and these goals are the responsibility of the international community, not just a few nations.<sup>4</sup>

The first action of the new United Nations in January 1946 was to address the question of the atomic bomb and how to control it. The United States proposed (in the Baruch Plan) elimination of all atomic weapons and international control of all nuclear activities. This vision failed, as the Soviet Union, still reeling from World War II and without the new super-weapon, was unwilling to accept international controls and intrusive inspections first and argued that the United States should disarm before others foreswore what they did not yet possess.<sup>5</sup>

Because the United States and the Soviet Union, still technically allies, so mistrusted each other that they could not find a way to agree on international control of civil nuclear activities and prohibition of nuclear weapons, global nuclear disarmament failed. As the Iron Curtain descended across Europe, so did the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union detonated its first test in August 1949, and in March 1952 the British followed suit.

By August of the following year both the United States and the Soviet Union had tested hydrogen bombs.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the distinction between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons evolved. Both events were generated by the balance in conventional forces. The United States and its NATO allies confronted the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Treaty Organization allies across the long frontier between Eastern and Western Europe. The principal threat was perceived to be a conventional attack, but NATO defense planners doubted that the West would be able to repel such an invasion with conventional forces. The alternatives were to risk losing control of the whole continent or to use nuclear weapons to break up the invading forces. Moving up the "escalation ladder" indicated willingness to move from war in central Europe to global war, the United States and its allies preferred world nuclear war to Soviet conquest of Western Europe. Another world war, and fighting it with nuclear weapons, were considered real possibilities, and nuclear weapons were war-fighting weapons, not political instruments.

For most of the Eisenhower administration, U.S. doctrine was that of "massive retaliation." "The way to deter aggression [by the Soviet Union] is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing."<sup>6</sup> The necessary



condition for "massive retaliation" to work was the perception of United States willingness to escalate directly to global nuclear war to defend allies against conventional attacks. Response to Soviet attacks would not be proportional and local, but directly on the USSR and massive, confronting the Soviet Union with the alternatives of halting aggression and not responding to an attack on its homeland or world nuclear war. This policy had several consequences.

First, would the United States really prove ready, in the event itself, to risk a strategic nuclear attack on the United States to halt a conventional attack in Europe? The credibility of the U.S. deterrent was a central problem for NATO. Doubts about the U.S. deterrent led, or at least contributed to, proliferation: in February 1960 France detonated its first atomic bomb.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps as a cause, and certainly as a consequence, nuclear weapons were increasingly associated with great power status. With France's ascension, four of the five permanent members of the Security Council were nuclear weapon states. Nuclear weapons were acquiring symbolic status.

A second consequence was a change in nuclear doctrine for the United States. The Kennedy administration introduced a new policy: flexible response. This policy created a fire-break between conventional and nuclear weapons, but for reasons of proportionality and credibility (the Acheson-Lillienthal perspective had been lost during

the arms race). Flexible response also introduced a new role for tactical nuclear weapons. Under massive retaliation tactical nuclear weapons were just another weapon in the arsenal, under flexible response they became a rung on the escalation ladder linking conventional forces with eventual use of strategic nuclear weapons.

Increasingly strategists thought in terms of military capabilities to signal intentions -- diplomacy began to compete with war-fighting as a basis for military decisions.

The 1960s saw many efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons and limit, if not reduce, the arsenals of the nuclear powers. The most significant of these was the 1967 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). One issue in the NPT negotiations was how countries forswearing nuclear weapons could be secure in the face of adversaries still armed with large nuclear arsenals. Assurances by the United States and the Soviet Union (attention focused on the two super-powers, although, Britain, France, and China were also pressed for such assurances) that nuclear weapons would not be used or threatened by a nuclear weapon state in confrontation with a non-nuclear weapon state were an important component of the political deal. Such "negative security assurances" were not included in the NPT itself, but first articulated as part of the General Assembly debate leading to approval of a resolution calling on all states to adhere to the NPT.

The problem of the military role of nuclear weapons was not resolved in that debate. The United States faced increasing pressure from the USSR and its allies, and from the neutral and non-aligned states, to agree that nuclear weapons could only be used in response to a nuclear attack. To do so would limit the scope of deterrence to *nuclear* war among the nuclear-weapons states. The United States refused; the imbalance of conventional forces in central Europe remained, and the need for an effective deterrent remained paramount. Attacks by a nuclear weapon state or its allies against U.S. treaty allies were still subject to retaliation by first use of nuclear weapons. In fact, for much of the 1970s, the practical policy was even less strict. In 1975 Secretary of Defense Schlesinger stated that the United States might respond to a North Korean attack on South Korea with nuclear weapons, a position reiterated by President Carter as late as May 1977.<sup>8</sup>

But pressures against possible use of nuclear weapons continued, both domestically and, perhaps even more importantly, within the international community. Even allies protected by the U.S. nuclear umbrella opposed doctrines contemplating nuclear war except as a last line of defense. In 1978 the United States articulated what remains U.S. policy today:

The United States will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear state party to the NPT or any comparable internationally binding commitment not to acquire nuclear explosive devices, except in the case of an attack on the United States, its territories or

armed forces, or allies, by such a state allied to a nuclear-weapons state or associated with a nuclear-weapons state in carrying out or sustaining the attack.<sup>9</sup>

Because negative security assurances are only a statement of policy and not binding, both allies and potential adversaries find some ambiguity with respect to the durability of nuclear negative security assurances. The United States has in fact intimated that nuclear weapons might be used in response were U.S. forces or allies subjected to chemical or biological attack, even by a non-nuclear weapon state.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, tactical nuclear weapons are largely eliminated from U.S. and Russian arsenals, and strategic weapons have as their primary role the deterrence of other strategic nuclear weapons. Essentially only nuclear weapons delivered on attack aircraft figure in any save Armageddon scenarios.

#### **Future Value of Nuclear Weapons**

Nuclear weapons entered the world as war-fighting weapons, but gradually evolved into weapons of strategic deterrence, whether between the United States and the Soviet Union or between such undeclared nuclear powers as India and Pakistan. Deterrence is a political relationship, and for this reason as well as their dreadful power, nuclear weapons are perceived to be more political (symbolic) weapons than military ones.

A perception widely held today is that there are now no direct military threats to the United States, and for this reason there are no appropriate targets for our strategic nuclear forces. Some analysts, and the Clinton administration, see the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons as a major threat:

[N]o armed opponent now appears capable of or intent upon threatening U.S. survival ... . Policymakers should recognize, however, that unless more effective responses are found to the problems of weapons proliferation and control, the risks to the United States may again escalate as more states acquire the ability to significantly increase the costs of U.S. power projection or directly to threaten the territory of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Will U.S. nuclear weapons provide an effective or appropriate response against such threats? A number of commentators argue that so long as the United States and other major powers possess nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons are legitimized. Certainly the political and military aspects of national security cannot be separated, but do nuclear weapons play a positive or negative role in the overall U.S. security balance?

#### Traditional Threats

For forty-five years the primary threat to the United States, and the central focus of all thinking about how to use nuclear weapons, was the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union, and its tight control over Eastern European allies, have disappeared. Former Warsaw Pact allies now seek NATO

protection against possible Russian hegemony instead of forming part of the massive Soviet conventional capability. The Soviet military has been split among several successor states. Although by far the largest part of the former Soviet Union military remained with Russia, its capabilities have been devastated by economic and social changes.

The United States is now deeply engaged with the Russian Federation and Ukraine on several levels, including efforts to strengthen those forces in each country which strive for democratic political institutions and for market economies. We are also working with each concerning the safe and secure dismantlement of nuclear weapons. The previous urgency to maintain a very credible -- large, survivable, and operationally ready -- strategic nuclear force has been replaced by an urgency to drastically reduce the strategic nuclear forces on both sides and to dispose of the special nuclear materials from these weapons in a secure and transparent fashion. Recently the United States and the Russian Federation agreed to aim our respective ballistic missiles at geographic coordinates in the ocean, rather than at each other.<sup>12</sup> The threat clearly is not what it was even a few years ago.

Certainly the strategic confrontation with the Soviet Union has been replaced by a new relationship, but what is that new relationship and how durable is it? The current trends are readily reversible, with powerful forces in both Russia and Ukraine working to accomplish just that reversal.

In Russia nationalist forces do not, for the most part, articulate a threat to the United States or directly to our interests (such as the territorial integrity of Western or Central Europe). They do seek renewed hegemony over neighboring states of the former Soviet Union, and pursuit of these objectives could create instability in areas to the west or south (that is, Western or Central Europe, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia). In addition, near-term imperialistic objectives in the "near abroad" can easily translate, if successful, to longer-range imperialistic objectives on the rim of the former Soviet Union, a return to the political status quo ante.

In the near term (perhaps the next decade) Russia will not be able to reconstitute a conventional military capability similar to that it possessed during the 1980s. Existing conventional forces are probably adequate for controlling or even recapturing the "near-abroad," but are not a threat to NATO allies. Russia also has most of the former Soviet Union's nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and these have not suffered the degradation of conventional forces. These forces will remain, as Russia is recognized by the United States and the rest of the international community as the legitimate successor to the Soviet Union as a nuclear weapon state.

Ukraine also possesses large numbers of operational strategic nuclear weapons. While the weapons in Ukraine are not under the total control of the Kiev government, factions

in the Ukrainian government publicly argue that Ukraine should become a nuclear-weapons state. Progress is being made towards political agreement for Ukraine to become a non-nuclear-weapon state, but implementation of that decision remains to be convincingly demonstrated, much less completed.

So long as a potential adversary maintains nuclear weapons, so must the United States. Strategic conventional forces cannot pose a credible threat against large numbers of strategic nuclear weapons. First, conventional weapons are not capable of performing counter-force roles against targets hardened to withstand direct nuclear attacks, regardless of how precisely they can be delivered on target. Lack of nuclear weapons to pose a credible counter-force threat would permit an adversary to scale the escalation ladder slowly but inexorably, at some point demonstrating willingness to use nuclear weapons in some remote and relatively unpopulated part of the United States, and demanding immediate acquiescence to whatever demands are made or additional weapons will be used against progressively more valuable targets in the United States. Even Nitze concedes this point, while arguing that "if the country initiating such use could be effectively disarmed by conventional forces, there would be no military reason to retaliate with a nuclear strike."<sup>13</sup> Given the defensive capabilities (and here we refer only to passive defenses, hardening of silos and the inherent difficulties in anti-



submarine warfare) developed for strategic nuclear forces during the Cold War, conventional weapons capable of providing a credible deterrent remain a distant prospect.

For the foreseeable future, only nuclear weapons will provide effective deterrence against the strategic weapons of Russia and China (and possibly a nuclear Ukraine) because only nuclear weapons would be effective in destroying those weapons.

#### **Extended Deterrence in the Traditional Context**

During the Cold War the first role for nuclear weapons was defense of the homeland, protecting the United States itself against attack by the Soviet Union (China could possibly pose a nuclear threat to the United States, but was never a central concern for U.S. deterrence policy). A second role, virtually equal in importance, was providing a security umbrella for our allies, primarily in Western Europe.

Today, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the role of extended deterrence in Europe recedes. For the moment there is no significant threat to our NATO allies. However, the question might re-emerge if Russia were again to pursue regional hegemony. Given the dramatic erosion of conventional military capabilities, even with aggressive intentions Russia would not pose the same threat the USSR did. Today's Russia would have to rely primarily on implied or actual nuclear threats in the

diplomatic pursuit of hegemony. Russia's conventional military forces do not appear strong enough to threaten NATO's conventional forces, thus never engaging the need for extended deterrence from nuclear weapons.

If NATO security guarantees were extended to those Eastern European countries now seeking entry into NATO, by definition extended nuclear deterrence would come into play. While the Partnership for Peace does not include direct security guarantees, several trends appear likely. The Partnership approach may ameliorate pressure from Visegrad (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) or Baltic countries to join NATO, but it will not eliminate it. To the extent that Russia continues to maintain military forces outside its own territory and asserts security interests in the "near abroad,"<sup>14</sup> these countries will press for a more formal and complete security relationship that includes the United States.

How the United States and NATO respond to Eastern European security concerns can affect the nature of the threat. As discussed above, continued atrophy of Russia's conventional forces makes it increasingly dependent on its nuclear forces, which remain largely intact. Increasing reliance on strategic nuclear forces<sup>15</sup> will lead to increasing instability whenever Russia feels seriously threatened by outside forces or seeks to increase influence (or hegemony) in the region.<sup>16</sup>

The United States will not in the near future explicitly extend the nuclear umbrella over Germany or Denmark to any of the Visegrad or Baltic states, for a variety of reasons. But continued U.S. possession of a credible strategic nuclear deterrent will nonetheless be relevant for maintaining peace and some modicum of stability in this region.

Whether nuclear deterrence, whether direct or extended, will work against states that do not have such a stake is another question.

#### **Detering, or Fighting, Emerging Threats**

Preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons has long been an important foreign policy objective of the United States, and today is one of the administration's primary goals.<sup>17</sup> U.S. nuclear weapons are relevant in two respects. First, the fact that the United States and the other permanent members of the Security Council all openly possess large inventories of nuclear weapons, and that this fact is ratified by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), has some important political consequences. These will be addressed the following section. A second important question is whether nuclear weapons give the United States any useful deterrence or war-fighting capabilities with respect to new proliferators or "backlash" states as the current administration has labelled them.

For deterrence to work, two conditions must be met. The deterring state must have the capability -- both military forces and the will to use them -- to deny something of value to the deterred state unless it refrains from certain behavior; and that something of value must relate, either functionally or politically, to the behavior which is to be deterred. The United States and the Soviet Union were each capable of wreaking devastating damage on the other even after first absorbing a nuclear strike. Hence each was deterred from staging such a strike, and also from threatening certain core values of the other which might have compelled a strategic response.

The argument is sometimes advanced that pariah states cannot be deterred because their leaders are irrational. The argument that deterring such states is very difficult is demonstrably correct, but to argue that the regime in Baghdad, or Pyongyang, or Teheran, is irrational is to frame the issue incorrectly. Irrationality involves behaving in a manner inconsistent with one's objectives and the context in which one must pursue them. In fact the behavior of all three regimes demonstrates considerable skill in pursuing their respective objectives with very limited political and military resources. The real issue is one of values. Deterrence will only work if the United States can directly threaten something that regime values, and this threat can be linked to continued avoidance of the behavior we seek to deter.

When nuclear proliferation is identified as a threat, more than one behavior is in fact of concern. The most obvious concern, and the behavior used as the syndoche for all the rest, is proliferation itself, the acquisition of nuclear weapons. But other behaviors, when linked with acquisition of nuclear weapons, are also of special concern. Frequently the new proliferator is pursuing regional hegemony and thus threatening its neighbors. The United States is also concerned when potential adversaries acquire such weapons, as they may be used against U.S. forces defending U.S. interests in the region. Finally, there are concerns that pariah or backlash states may transfer nuclear weapons to others of the same ilk (neither nuclear nor conventional forces can deter such transfers, hence they will not figure further here).

U.S. nuclear weapons as such cannot deter another state from developing its own, except in the case where U.S. weapons can provide an alternate source of security against some external threat; this returns us to a discussion of extended deterrence.

Potential proliferators, and many past proliferators, are states for which the U.S. nuclear umbrella is not credible, and mostly states for which the U.S. would not consider extending the umbrella. Why France chose to develop its own nuclear forces is complex and arguable (see note 8), but the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe was not adequate to prevent it. Certainly Israel developed nuclear

weapons because it lacked confidence in the willingness of the U.S. to defend it. States like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea consider the United States the enemy, not a potential defender.

U.S. nuclear weapons could only deter proliferation in these cases were the United States prepared to use nuclear weapons to eliminate a nascent program. This use is not credible, for many valid reasons. A nuclear pre-emptive strike against a nascent nuclear program violates both the general tenet of proportionality and the very nuclear taboo which the United States wishes to reinforce. More generally, pre-emptive strikes violate American norms of behavior. Seth Cropsey has noted, in the context of using conventional weapons in a pre-emptive strike, that "since the mid-1980s, for instance, the United States has had a declared policy of seeking out and destroying terrorists in advance of an attack. But this policy has never been carried out."<sup>18</sup>

The second behavior of concern is implied threats against neighbors. Backlash states are judged to have hegemonic designs within the region, and nuclear weapons create an implied threat even when there is no explicit threat, or the threat is explicitly denied. One role for U.S. nuclear weapons is that of providing extended deterrence in such cases; giving assurance to U.S. allies in the region that, in case of threats or attacks by the newly nuclear would-be hegemon, the United States will guarantee

the security of our allies. Extended deterrence has long been a role for U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. For such guarantees to be credible, those states we seek to reassure must believe that we would actually use nuclear weapons if needed, which brings us to the third behavior of concern.<sup>19</sup>

This is the potential use of nuclear weapons by the proliferator against U.S. forces, or those of allies, which are defending U.S. interests. An Indian General, K. Sundarji, has observed that the real lesson leaders like Saddam Hussein will draw from the Gulf War is to acquire nuclear weapons before going to war with the United States.<sup>20</sup> A great deal of insight is packaged in this comment. There are both practical and policy reasons why the United States is likely to find nuclear weapons unusable against backlash states except when the backlash state initiates the exchange.

The practical reason is simply that the proliferator would no longer have reason to refrain from using its weapons. For example, were a nuclear armed North Korea to invade South Korea again, and in the first days of the invasion rout South Korean forces, the United States might threaten to use tactical nuclear weapons on North Korean forces or elements of their logistical support. North Korea could respond that if attacked with nuclear weapons it would strike Japanese cities with its few nuclear weapons. One could argue that this threat lacked credibility, as to

fulfill it would surely condemn the North Korea's regime to total destruction. But would the United States be willing to take that risk? What would Japan's reaction be?

While geography favors North Korea in this example,<sup>21</sup> other would-be regional hegemony armed with nuclear weapons could exploit the same dynamic. Even when the geographic situation does not provide such leverage, Seth Cropsey has noted three reasons why the "weapons of America's still formidable nuclear arsenal are a poor deterrent against the often dictatorial regimes of lesser nations."<sup>22</sup>

First, nuclear weapons wreak enormous damage. Even when used against military targets in the aggressor state, substantial civilian damage is likely to result. Damage so great would seem disproportionate in the eyes of many, at home and abroad, undermining the very moral basis for our response to the tyrant.

Secondly, as argued above, deterrence only works when something of value is threatened. Dictators of the kind ruling Iraq or North Korea, and most probably also Iran, have very different values than democratic governments do. Threatening military or even economic infrastructure may not deter. Only threatening the existence of the regime guarantees deterrence, and this can usually be accomplished quite well, or even more effectively, with conventional force.

Perhaps most importantly, to use nuclear weapons to deter aggression by a dictator, nuclear-equipped or not,



would be for the United States to "subvert the very aim of its broader policy -- to prevent the nuclear threshold from being crossed."<sup>23</sup>

None of the above arguments leads to the judgment that the United States should entirely rule out using nuclear weapons. It is to argue that only in the most extreme cases can the United States credibly threaten, or use, nuclear weapons, against "backlash" states. Even when that state used nuclear weapons first, a nuclear response may not be justified. An attack on civilian targets might almost force nuclear retaliation, just to re-establish some semblance of a norm precluding use of such weapons against civilian targets (an ironic notion given the doctrine of "mutual assured destruction" used to justify strategic targeting by the United States and the Soviet Union against each other, but nonetheless what is likely to be a strong norm outside that narrow context). A nuclear attack on U.S. or allied military forces might precipitate a nuclear response, but this would depend more on military than political circumstances.

The same line of argument applies to "backlash" states threatening use of chemical or biological weapons. U.S. nuclear weapons provide little deterrence in such cases, with the same exception. A state actually employing either of these weapons, whether against U.S. forces or others, risks creating a situation in which U.S. nuclear weapons might be used, and used with justification. In such cases

proportionality weighs heavily, and the appropriate response will depend on the details of the first use. Norms of international behavior will also be important.

The United States and many of its allies may wish to establish a norm, or precedent, for destroying a regime which first uses such weapons in war.<sup>24</sup> For example, President Bush intimated, in his letter to Saddam Hussein, that if Iraq used weapons of mass destruction against the coalition forces, his government would be destroyed (see note 10). If the international response to first use (by a backlash state) is to destroy that regime, either nuclear weapons or conventional forces could be used, and Bush was interpreted as implying the possibility of a nuclear response. However, reciprocal use of nuclear weapons, or nuclear weapons in response to chemical or biological weapons, may simply violate twice the very norm the United States seeks to uphold.<sup>25</sup>

In the fifty years since nuclear weapons were used, this norm against using nuclear weapons has developed because of the terrible and long-term damage they would produce. Today none of the five declared nuclear-weapon states would use nuclear weapons except under the most dire circumstances.<sup>26</sup> Which leads us to the question of whether having nuclear weapons is a political asset or a liability, what are the political consequences for the United States of being a nuclear weapons state, and still the one with the most powerful arsenal?

## The Political Consequences of Nuclear Weapons:

### Real Power versus Symbols of Power

Andrew Mack has argued that "A nuclear weapons program may have political rationales that are independent of its strategic role . . . because states are taken more seriously as players in the world of geopolitics when they are nuclear-armed."<sup>27</sup> If, as claimed by Mack and many others, this rationale works for smaller powers, it must do likewise for the United States. It may be an historical accident that the five states holding permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council are also the five states recognized in the NPT as legitimate nuclear weapons states,<sup>28</sup> but this fact has created a context for status as a nuclear weapon state.

Nuclear weapons are the ultimate sanction. Each of the acknowledged nuclear powers possesses the weapons, and the delivery systems, to literally end the existence of most countries, and to approximate that result with each other.<sup>29</sup> Maintaining this ultimate power is certainly consistent with, and may perhaps even be necessary to, remaining the one global superpower. Possessing more nuclear weapons than any other state maintains "escalation dominance," the ability to win any fight, no matter how nasty or large it may become.

Nuclear weapons also provide national confidence in ourselves.<sup>30</sup> John Deutsch has argued that "[t]he effectiveness of U.S. security guarantees in deterring

conflicts relies on America's political-military strength, which is, in part, supported by its nuclear arsenal."<sup>31</sup>

"Escalation dominance," just being the most powerful country in a most unambiguous way, creates confidence which is very valuable in many lesser situations where the actual exercise of that ultimate power may not be relevant.

At the same time, reliance on nuclear weapons confronts the United States with an inherent policy contradiction. To the extent that the United States derives its power from possessing nuclear weapons, even in the sense of domestic will to take risks that otherwise might be unacceptable, the idea that nuclear weapons are important for and relevant to every state's national security is reinforced.

The inherently discriminatory character of nonproliferation mechanisms is incompatible with an era in which technology, industrial capability, and expertise are slowly spreading throughout the world. Permanent firebreaks between the haves and have-nots will only fuel the ambitions of the have-nots to acquire what they have been denied.<sup>32</sup>

This was one fundamental insight of the Acheson-Lillienthal Report. The history of the NPT supports this contention, and it clearly will be a major issue at the 1995 NPT Extension Conference. So long as the United States maintains nuclear weapons, many countries will argue that we lead by example. Whatever the words, the actions demonstrate that nuclear weapons are both useful and legitimate. It is not just potential proliferators who

perceive this message, but also such strong NPT supporters as Mexico and Nigeria.

If preventing proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological) is now one of the highest national security goals for the United States, should the United States pursue new efforts to negotiate a truly global nuclear disarmament agreement? Certainly a world in which backlash states (or even adversaries as powerful as Russia could again become) could confront the United States with cruise-missiles and other high technology conventional weapons, but not nuclear (or chemical or biological) weapons, would be a more secure place. U.S. forces might face formidable adversaries, but none that our advantages in technology and wealth could not defeat.

Were the prospect for all states to both agree to such a new global nuclear disarmament treaty and then to abide by it realistic, this would be an option worth serious consideration and diplomatic effort. But the history of non-proliferation agreements (the NPT and the Biological Weapons Convention, for instance) provides no basis for believing that any genie, nuclear or otherwise, can be put back into a bottle. States threatened by larger and more powerful adversaries will always face serious temptation to find an "equalizer." And even when the international system finds a way to provide credible security guarantees to such

states, the renegade dictator, willing to use any means to increase his power, will force the issue.

### Conclusions

Certainly there appear to be both positive and negative consequences from nuclear weapons, and the question must be how these weigh out for the several objectives of U.S. policy. However, as we have seen, the benefits from eliminating the U.S. nuclear arsenal are tenuous, while the prospects of being confronted by a nuclear armed adversary can only be increased by eliminating our own weapons. Serious threats may arise from many quarters, and nuclear weapons may be necessary to deter adversaries from threatening either the United States or our allies.

So long as other states maintain nuclear arsenals, so must the United States. Russian (and Chinese or even Ukrainian) strategic nuclear weapons create the potential for a serious nuclear threat to re-emerge. A threat which can only be deterred by a survivable U.S. arsenal of equivalent size. Whether this strategic nuclear deterrent should be intercontinental ballistic missiles, sea-launched ballistic missiles, or some combination, will be a function of force posture calculations, as will the specifics of size. But the role, and need, for a strategic nuclear deterrent will continue so long as any potential adversary has the capability.

Backlash or rogue states will also continue to pose a substantial security problem for the United States. Deterrence against such regimes is limited and unpredictable, as is the contribution of nuclear weapons to such deterrence. Mobile and powerful conventional forces must be the primary military tool for dealing with such threats. But a major aspect of these threats is the propensity to proliferate weapons of mass destruction. Norms against proliferation, and especially against use, of such weapons cannot be maintained by conventional weapons alone. A ruler infatuated with weapons of mass destruction best understands a response in kind. He may believe that his weapons of mass destruction can stop U.S. conventional forces (as Saddam Hussein believed that high initial casualties would force the United States to quit the campaign to liberate Kuwait). Nuclear weapons deployable to the theater, such as bombs delivered by attack aircraft, best combine the presence and immediacy, and the potential for actual use, to constitute an effective deterrent.<sup>33</sup> Routine deployment of such weapons overseas would be perceived as provocative and would undercut our non-proliferation objectives. Deployment of a few weapons at an appropriate moment in a crisis (following large conventional deployments and threats of escalation by the adversary) would signal the magnitude of U.S. concern and resolve. In the unlikely event that deterrence failed and the adversary used weapons of mass destruction and the United States

judged it necessary to respond with nuclear weapons, the U.S. response would be perceived as more proportional and justified.

Nuclear weapons also play important symbolic roles for the United States. While nuclear weapons do not certify the United States as the one super-power, were the United States to eliminate its nuclear weapons while other states retained theirs, we might demote ourselves to being just another great power. Nuclear weapons are consonant with super-power status, and they provide confidence (and an extra military margin for error) in behaving as the super-power.

Nuclear weapons will remain instruments of deterrence and symbols of power. If fears about proliferation of backlash states armed with weapons of mass destruction prove correct, nuclear weapons may also become war-fighting weapons to a greater degree than any time in the last 20 years.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul H. Nitze, "Is It Time to Junk Our Nukes? The New World Disorder Makes them Obsolete," The Washington Post, Sunday, January 16, 1994, pp. C1 & C2. Advocacy of conventional strategic forces, specifically cruise missiles, rather than nuclear weapons, can be found in Seth Cropsey, "The Only Credible Deterrent," Foreign Affairs, volume 73, number 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 14 - 20. See also Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," Foreign Affairs, volume 70, number 3 (Fall 1991), pp. 95 - 110.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include: Thomas C. Reed and Michael O. Wheeler, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the New World Order," unpublished manuscript, January 13, 1992; Leon Sloss, "U.S. Strategic Forces After the Cold War: Policies and Strategies," The Washington Quarterly, Autumn 1991, pp. 145 - 155; even authors well to the left of Nitze represent this view, such as Philip Morrison, Kosta Tsipis, and Jerome Wiesner "The Future of American Defense," Scientific American, volume 270, number 2 (February 1994), pp. 38 45.

<sup>3</sup> During the Cold War the Soviet threat involved conventional war in Europe and focused on our inability to counter that threat with conventional forces alone, nuclear deterrence grew out of that dynamic. It is unlikely that the Russian Federation could reconstitute a comparably formidable conventional threat within the next decade, so any short-term Russian threat is essentially nuclear. The consequences of this changed dynamic for U.S. force structure are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Allan McKnight, Atomic Safeguards: a Study in International Verification (New York: United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 1971), pp. 3 - 4.

<sup>5</sup> J. Christian Kessler, "History and Current Trends in Nuclear Safeguards," unpublished manuscript prepared for use at the International Training Course on Implementation of State Systems of Accounting for and Control of Nuclear Materials, May 12 - 28, 1993, sponsored by the IAEA and the United States; pp. 1 - 2.

<sup>6</sup> John Foster Dulles, quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> The reasons for France's decision to develop an independent nuclear deterrent are complex, and beyond the scope of this paper, but doubts about the credibility of the U.S. deterrent appear to be one of several reasons. Britain and the U.S. both had nuclear weapons, as did the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were emblematic of great power status, if they did not help create it. President de Gaulle was intent on France becoming the leader of a European power center between the Atlantic Alliance of the United States and Britain on the one hand and the Soviet Union and its satellites on the other.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard S. Spector, Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, 1989 - 1990 (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1990), p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in "Pentagon Begins Policy Review of Post-Cold War Nuclear Strategy," by Dunbar Lockwood, Arms Control Today, volume 23, number 10 (December 1993), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> President Bush wrote to Saddam Hussein on January 5, 1991, warning that "unconscionable acts" such as "the use of chemical or biological weapons" would cause the American people to "demand the strongest possible response" and the result would be that Iraq would "pay a terrible price." A month later the President "deliberately declined to rule out a nuclear response to Iraqi use of chemical weapons" in public remarks. Philip Zelikow, "Offensive Military Options," in New Nuclear Nations: Consequences for U.S. Policy, edited by Robert D. Blackwill and Albert Carnesale (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993), pp. 172 & 192, note 8 (from which quotes of Bush letter are drawn).

<sup>11</sup> Brad Roberts, "Arms Control and the End of the Cold War," The Washington Quarterly, volume 15, number 4 (autumn 1992), p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Devroy and Margaret Shapiro, "Clinton Pledges U.S. Support for Russia's Revival; Yeltsin, Kravchuk Join Accord to End Ukraine's Nuclear Force," The Washington Post, January 15, 1994, page A1; see also R. Jeffrey Smith, "U.S., Russia May Retarget Missiles Towards Oceans," The Washington Post, January 13, 1994, page A22.

<sup>13</sup> Nitze, op. cit., p. C2.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Fred Hiatt, "Russia Seeks Bases in Former Republic," The Washington Post, Thursday, February 3, 1994, A21.

<sup>15</sup> Russia's tactical nuclear forces, like U.S. forces, having been largely eliminated by arms control agreements.

<sup>16</sup> This point was originally noted by CAPT Wynn Harding in the course of a conversation on the Russian security situation, February 15, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Adequate testimony to this fact can be found in the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, which prohibited all nuclear cooperation with other countries and required virtually total secrecy concerning nuclear technologies, civil or military. This policy was substantially relaxed, pursuant to President Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program which included nuclear cooperation with other countries, established in the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, but was itself significantly restricted, and additional restrictions were established in subsequent amendments, principally the Nuclear Non-proliferation Act of 1978. The Clinton Administration's foreign policy priorities, and the status of non-proliferation as one of the six highest priorities, was articulated by Secretary of State Warren

Christopher in a November 4, 1993 statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (U.S. Department of State Dispatch, Volume 4, number 47, pp. 797 - 802).

18 Cropsey, op. cit., p. 16.

19 Cropsey argues that "extended deterrence -- the ability of the U.S. nuclear forces to protect its allies -- is dead. Washington's public hand-wringing about using nuclear weapons to defend states hosting U.S. forces has already undermined the credibility of the deterrent." (op. cit. p. 16) This observation notes genuine mistakes made by senior U.S. officials in past public comments, but is badly overdrawn. There is no reason to think that either Saddam Hussein or the Pyongyang regime doubt our ultimate resolve, the question is circumstances.

20 George H. Quester and Victor A. Utgoff, "No-First-Use and Nonproliferation: Redefining Extended Deterrence," The Washington Quarterly, volume 17, number 2 (Spring 1994), p. 107.

21 Because of the proximity of major Japanese cities and Japan's close alliance with the United States.

22 Cropsey, op. cit., p. 15.

23 Ibid., p. 15.

24 Great caution is necessary here, especially given the absence of Western response when Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran. It would be important to ensure that the message was "do not use weapons of mass destruction in war" rather than "do not use such weapons against the United States or its friends." The second message is a sure recipe for serious terrorism, although the first might possibly be as well.

25 Cropsey makes this argument as to why the United States cannot use nuclear weapons against dictators; op. cit., p. 15.

26 Some might argue this point in view of the recent doctrinal change in Russia, which for the first time explicitly contemplates the first use of nuclear weapons. While one could argue that this represents a new and less responsible attitude in Moscow, the more reasonable view might be that Moscow now faces circumstances similar to those long faced by Washington. The moral high ground is now relatively valueless for Moscow, and the reality of weakness in conventional forces generates serious insecurity, and a recognition of reality. Russia is not threatened today the way Israel is threatened, or even (at least in our view) the way the West was threatened by the specter of Soviet tanks streaming through the Fulda Gap and across the German plain. At least some in Moscow claim to see similar threats to Russia.

27 Andrew Mack, "The Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula," Asian Survey, volume 33, number 4 (April, 1993), p. 343

28 When the NPT was negotiated in the mid-1960s, the People's Republic of China was a very recent entry into the ranks of nuclear weapons states. The Republic of China continued to occupy the Chinese seat on the Security Council, which was designated as one of the five permanent seats during negotiation of the Charter in 1945 for reasons that looked backwards to the coalition of allies which had fought World War II and some sense of which countries would be significant in the immediate post-war world. U.S. policy at this time was more oriented towards the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons than acceptance of these weapons as conferring great power status.

29 Even the relatively small arsenals of Britain, France, or China would certainly end cultural and economic life as we know it in either Russia or the United States. The fact that humanity would continue to survive there and maintain some, albeit much more basic, form of political and economic life does not gainsay the argument that it would for all practical purposes no longer be Russia or the United States.

30 Interview with Brad Roberts, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.

31 John M. Deutsch, "The New Nuclear Threat," Foreign Affairs, Fall 1992, p. 130.

32 Brad Roberts, "Arms Control and the End of the Cold War" op. cit., p. 45.

33 The argument here is for use of relative small nuclear weapons in an essentially strategic role -- which is to say a demonstration of overwhelming military capability to convince the adversary that for him victory is simply unachievable at any cost -- against a relatively unsophisticated adversary. This is not an argument for battlefield nuclear weapons, which were the classical concept of tactical nuclear weapons. Nuclear artillery (whether tube or missile) would send a different political message: that nuclear weapons are simply a more powerful battlefield weapon. This could only encourage proliferation.

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